

Edward Coles, Illinois' Abolitionist Governor

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The course of Illinois history took an unexpected turn when an abolitionist became the second governor of Illinois. During the thirteen years he spent in the state, Edward Coles proved himself to be an individual whose ideas were far ahead of his time. Born in Albemarle County, Virginia, he was a former slave owner, an idealistic aristocrat and the confidant of presidents. An influential and effective governor, Edward Coles had a tremendous impact on the state of Illinois and shaped the state's notions concerning slavery, making it a free state before the Civil War.

On December 15, 1786, Edward Coles was born to John Coles II and Rebecca Elizabeth Tucker Coles. He was the youngest of ten children. Coles' father was a Revolutionary War colonel. Coming from a prominent Virginian family, Coles grew up on a plantation with many slaves. Consequently, he was accustomed to a pro-slavery atmosphere. Socially, he knew the leading Virginia statesmen. His friends and relatives were slave owners. Like most sons of southern planters, Coles received his early education from private tutors and at a modest local academy. In 1805, he continued his education at Hampden-Sydney College, and then later transferred to the College of William and Mary.

From his early college days, Coles' attention had been drawn to the question of slavery. He fell under the influence of Bishop James Madison, the college president, who encouraged his students to read and learn the texts and ideas of the Enlightenment. Madison considered slavery a violation of natural law as expressed in the Declaration of

Independence. Coles engrossed himself in Madison's lectures on moral philosophy and Enlightenment ideas. It became impossible for Coles to accept the practice of slave-holding with the immortal declaration "that all men are born free and equal." He concluded that man was not property and therefore should not be treated as such. "I could not consent to hold as property what I had no right to, & which was not, and could not be property, according to my understanding of the rights & duties of men- and therefore determined that I would not and could not hold my fellowman as a slave," Coles recalled.

At the age of twenty-three, upon his father's death in 1808, Coles inherited a nine hundred-acre plantation and twenty-three slaves. He decided to free his slaves at the first opportunity, and even relocate to Northwest Territory where slavery had been banned by the Ordinance of 1787. However, he was dissuaded from taking any course of action by his brother, Isaac, who asked Coles to replace him as secretary to President James Madison. Initially, Edward Coles was reluctant. However, he was ultimately persuaded by his benefactor, James Monroe. As private secretary to President Madison, Coles spent six years in the White House. During these years, he passionately sought out information about the Old Northwest and tried to convince Jefferson to develop and take leadership in some plan for gradual emancipation.

Coles quit his post in 1815 and took a trip, traveling by a horse and buggy, as well as saddle horse to Shawneetown and Kaskaskia into the Illinois Territory. A servant also accompanied him on this journey. Coles was impressed with Illinois, but President Madison called him back for a diplomatic mission to Russia. Upon returning from Russia, Coles made a second trip to Kaskaskia and attended the constitutional convention

in Illinois. This was being held to write a state constitution since this was one of the requirements that a territory had to do before it could become a state.

During the convention the question of slavery or no slavery within the borders of Illinois was a serious issue. Settlers from the South who had come to Illinois had continued to hold their slaves. Additionally, one or two thousand slaves were used in the government owned salt mines of southern Illinois. The pro-slavery delegates to the constitutional convention argued that if slavery were excluded the salt mines would be forced to close. However, a compromise was reached. The new Illinois constitution forbade bringing slaves into the new state, but did not free the slaves who were already there. Coles did not leave the convention until he was certain that Illinois would become a free state.

In the spring of 1819, Coles returned to Virginia and sold his plantation and began his journey westward along with his slaves. On an Ohio River flatboat, Coles told his slaves that from that moment on they were free men and women, and that they had the choice of whether or not to stay with him or follow their own paths. He told the freed slaves that if they did decide to stay with him, he would ensure that each family settled on a farm and pay them wages.

After arriving in Edwardsville, Illinois, Coles assumed the duty of registrar at the Edwardsville land office. He had been appointed to this position by President Monroe prior to his arrival. Coles became well known in Illinois due to his youthful, courteous and dignified appeal.

Three years later, he decided to run for governor as an antislavery candidate. In the election of 1822, he ran against one antislavery candidate and two pro-slavery

candidates. Coles received only a third of the vote. However, it was the highest. Therefore he won. Thus, Coles became a minority governor. The lieutenant governorship and control of the legislature were won by the pro-slavery candidates. In his inaugural address, Coles asked for the emancipation of the slaves that had been kept as the result of the 1818 compromise. He felt that was the humane thing to do. This, to the pro-slavery men of Illinois, was a direct assault upon their prized tradition. Therefore, the legislators, who were members of the proslavery group, prepared for an active fight to legalize slavery through a constitutional amendment.

The proslavery amendment movement had strong support. Anti-Coles men dominated a special committee which insisted that Virginia's guarantee to the French took precedence over the 1787 Ordinance. Additionally, the proslavery legislators asserted that Illinois had the same right as any other state to amend its constitution, and therefore became a slave state even though the Northwest Ordinance forbid it. A referendum to have a constitutional convention, which would write an amendment, was recommended. A two-thirds majority in each legislative house and a majority vote of the people at the 1824 general election was required for the proposition to pass.

At this point, Coles promptly organized an antislavery society with the aid of Morris Birkbeck and issued an address to the people that exposed the intentions and schemes of the convention backers. Coles concluded the address by stating that if the proslavery group triumphed "we should write the epitaph of free government." The document stressed the immoral aspects of slavery and it was written by Governor Coles and signed by fifteen legislators.

The campaign for the constitutional amendment continued for nearly a year and a half, drawing intense public involvement. This was a direct result of Coles' recruitment of prominent writers that wrote pamphlets that were published anonymously. Furthermore, Coles with the aid of antislavery supporters bought the Edwardsville *Intelligencer* and switched its editorial policy to argue that slavery was "both wrong in principle and unprofitable." The purchase of this newspaper was important because three out of five of Illinois' newspapers supported slavery. Coles even went as far as donating his four-year salary to the cause of anti-slavery and spent heavily from his own funds to support it.

After an eighteen-month campaign, the voters of Illinois went to the polls to vote on the constitutional convention. Unquestionably, Coles and the antislavery convention cause triumphed, 6,640 to 4,972. In spite of this victory, two decades would pass before the courts would finally rule that slavery in Illinois was illegal.

With this accomplishment in hand, Coles repeated his request for more humane laws for blacks to the incoming legislature; nevertheless, harassment continued. Another issue arose for Coles as the Madison County officials brought suit against him. In freeing his slaves, Coles was unaware of the law that required him to post bond swearing they never would become public charges. The suit ended after the Supreme Court released Coles from the two-thousand-dollar penalty, and he was cleared. Coles' last political victory was the 1824 referendum. After completing his term, he made a poor showing as an anti-Jackson candidate for Congress.

On November 28, 1833, Governor Coles married Sally Logan Roberts. He continued living in Edwardsville, taking care of his farm after the expiration of his term

of service. Being fond of agriculture, Coles founded the first agricultural society in the state. Due to poor health, he left Illinois in 1832 for Philadelphia. He passed away at his residence on July 7, 1868.

Undoubtedly, Edward Coles was an influential figure during the early 1800s. He not only was a strong believer in the equality of all people, but also a powerful, efficient governor. He led Illinois through a difficult era and was largely responsible for removing slavery from the state. Coles influenced Illinois history in a way no other governor before him or after him ever did. He insured the status of Illinois as a free state before the Civil War. [From Arthur C. Boggess, *The Settlement of Illinois 1778-1830*; Robert P. Howard, *Illinois*; James Gray, *The Illinois*; Robert P. Sutton, *The Prairie State*; Robert P. Sutton, *The Heartland*; Illinois Periodicals Online, "Governor Edward Coles," <<http://lib.niu.edu/ipo/1994/ihy940462.html>> (Aug. 29, 2006); Illinois Periodicals Online, "Edward Coles, Patrician Emancipator," <<http://www.lib.niu.edu/ipo/2005/iht1210502.html>> (Aug. 29, 2006); Illinois, "The Slavery Question in Illinois," <<http://www.state.il.us/HPA/lovejoy/illinois.htm>> (Aug. 29, 2006); and Governors of Illinois, "Governor Edward Coles of Illinois," <<http://history.rays-place.com/governors/il/coles-e.htm>> (Aug. 28, 2006).]